



# Including all children and young people



Moving towards a positive  
approach in youth policy in  
the Netherlands



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# Introduction

**Within the Netherlands a shift in focus in youth policy is becoming apparent. From a merely problem-focused approach to individual children and young people at risk, there is a growing emphasis to work towards strengthening the ‘well-being’ rather than the ‘well-becoming’ of all children and young people between 0 and 25 years of age. It is not standing policy yet, but definitely trending. This approach focusses more on creating an inclusive, child and youth oriented policy in education and in youth services, covering all daily life aspects. This is within the context of their families, on the streets, in school, during their leisure time, in sports and cultural activities and in their youth networks.**

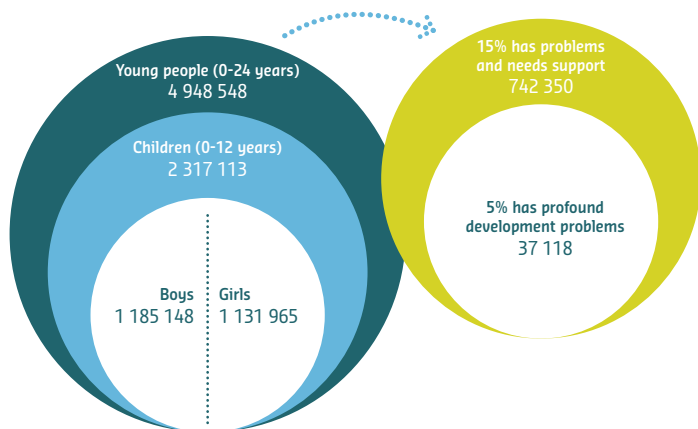
In the Netherlands, programmes and projects at local level show stronger alliances for and with children and young people. A diversity of stakeholders work together with them and with the local municipalities which are directly responsible for youth policy within the Dutch decentralized system. By describing this change in focus and presenting local examples of these practices in three Dutch municipalities (Rotterdam, Capelle aan den IJssel, Maastricht) we provide a closer look into what this means for children and young people living in the Netherlands.

## What is 'positive' in Dutch youth policy?

The term 'positive' is introduced to provide a meaning to the change of focus in Dutch youth policy. For decades youth policy has started from a (negative), risk-oriented, individual approach in supporting children and young people at risk. Now youth policy is trending towards a more development-oriented and demand-driven (positive) approach in working with and for all children and young people. Not starting by questioning 'What is the matter with you?', but by asking 'What do you need to feel well?' Every child has talents and every child counts. That is regarded as the solid basis for a healthy society. In such a society children and young people can develop their talents and they learn - by a number of experiences - to take responsibility for their own lives and the environment they live in. In policy terms, this means investing in positive upbringing, facilitating a successful school career and enabling the development of children and young people towards democratic citizenship, economical independence and welfare. In order to realize this, it is crucial to address the context in which children and young people grow up. This not only concerns their parents or other educators within their private lives, but also others like professionals and volunteers in child care, youth work, youth and family centres, at schools, within the non-formal educational field and at the sports club. In short, it takes a village to raise a child.

## Some facts about the Netherlands

- › 16.7 million inhabitants
- › 30% youth
- › 1 million immigrants
- › 180.000 births a year
- › almost 5 million young people:
  - 0.7 million 0 – 4 years
  - 1.6 million 5 – 12 years
  - 2.6 million 13 – 25 years



“Total number of children and young people in the Netherlands”

Source: Youth Monitor, CBS Statline

## Example of Rotterdam: How to build a Child Friendly City

**“If you design places that work well for children, they seem to work well for everyone else.” As we all once have been children ourselves, this seems a logical way of working in urban planning. The city of Rotterdam has adopted ‘child-friendliness’ as a valuable tool to design a liveable, sustainable city. In three years time Rotterdam developed a measuring instrument, an urban planning method and a pedagogical approach to becoming a truly Child Friendly City.**

“Child-friendliness is not just about building playgrounds”, says programme coordinator Rita Wapperom. “It is an alternative, future-based, holistic way of thinking about urban planning, a long-term strategy to keep families in the city and to attract new families. When working in a child-friendly manner, one looks at the city, in all its aspects, through the eyes of a child. Its wants and needs are taken into account in all policy documents and in the design and reconstruction of all infrastructure and amenities. Just a simple example of how child-friendliness can be integrated in the city’s everyday maintenance: when a road is being repaved - work that needs to be done anyway - it would be child-friendly to do this in such a way that the sidewalk is on the sunny side of the street, and is made large enough for children to play on.”





With such an integrated approach, qualified and reliable partners are indispensable. Confronted with high rates of families moving away from the city in the nineties and around the change of the millennium, the municipality invited housing corporations, property developers, schools, universities, youth work organizations and other partners to come up with a coherent strategic vision with four main aims: enhancing the city as a residential location, keeping families in the city, strengthening the economy and improving the quality of life for children from 0 to 18 years. Between 2007 and 2011 this consortium developed an urban planning method called 'Building Blocks for a Child Friendly Rotterdam' and tools to measure the effects of the city's specific efforts towards becoming a Child Friendly City.

### **Child Friendly Cities Network**

The Child Friendly Cities Network in the Netherlands is coordinated by the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG). It functions as a platform of aldermen of the city councils, civil servants and policy advisors and others interested in the field of innovative youth policy. Participation in this network provides local municipalities with the opportunity to share views, experiences and practices to further develop child and youth friendly environments within their cities. The development of positive youth policy is an important focus for this platform. The Dutch platform is part of the European Network of Child Friendly Cities.

> [www.childfriendlycities.nl](http://www.childfriendlycities.nl)

Key element of the urban planning method is its regional approach: the variety of the city's districts and neighbourhoods is very much taken into account.

Four Building Blocks are used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the different neighbourhoods: child-friendly housing, public space, facilities and safe traffic routes. For each one of the Building Blocks a set of conditions is specified. A child-friendly apartment, for example, should have a net floor area of at least 85 m<sup>2</sup> and there should be a room for each child. Schoolyards should have a certain percentage of greenery, speed-reduction measures should be taken at points where children cross the street, and so forth.

The results of the scans are represented in diagrams that indicate and prioritize the measures that neighbourhoods may take to become more child friendly. Rita Wapperom: “Seeing as local government in Rotterdam is decentralized, the city offered these neighbourhood scans, together with a training programme, to all district councils. We will pay for the package under the condition that the district councils will take the necessary measures to become more child-friendly.” The district councils were also asked to take the lead in developing a uniform neighbourhood-specific pedagogical approach to be applied to all children, parents and other local residents, schools and youth work organizations.

One of the districts that successfully took up the challenge is the Old North, a district with a high percentage of children but lacking the appropriate public housing facilities to accommodate them. Apartments are too small for the large families that occupy them, children hang about in the streets, school dropout rates are high and public nuisance is widespread. Project manager Gerhard Hup: “In close cooperation with our main housing corporation, we deliberately chose to combine physical and social interventions because they mutually reinforce one another.



Schoolyards, playgrounds and public areas around apartments are redesigned on the basis of the pedagogical approach that we developed together with the neighbourhood's children, parents, schools and other partners. In this approach we focus a great deal on the encouragement of children's talents. Good examples are the playing devices that function only if children work together, and the child-friendly traffic routes that we designed, with a lot of educational greenery that attracts children's attention to the beauty of nature."

### **Decentralized responsibilities in Dutch youth policy**

The national Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, directorate Youth Affairs has the responsibility to coordinate national youth issues, in cooperation with other departments such as the ministries of Education, Social Affairs and Employment, Justice and Internal Affairs. The direct responsibility for implementing youth policy in the Netherlands is decentralized to the regional and local levels. In the current system of youth policy, general, preventive youth policy is a local responsibility and the specialized and targeted services for those who need special care are a provincial one. This division will come to an end in 2016 when municipalities will be solely responsible for the universal, preventive and voluntary as well as the compulsory care services for those in need.

An important role was taken up by a community school. In close collaboration with the district council, the housing corporation, an external pedagogical consultant and the children themselves, the school developed a successful range of services outside of normal school hours. Under the name of 'Child Campus', these services include childcare and activities and support for learning.

Its pedagogical approach also contains uniform codes of conduct for children and guidelines for parents, educators and street coaches on how to act when these rules are not observed. As a result, a pedagogical climate has been created in which the same rules apply to all children, at home, at school and on the street.

### **Professionals, civil society and involvement of peers**

Part of positive youth policy is to develop better support tools for youth workers, teachers and voluntary organizations in civil society, but also for parents to support the optimal development of children and young people. New instruments in facilitating informal networks between families, civil society associations and peer groups are now under construction or already proved to be effective in practice. Also, new approaches for specialist care workers are being developed. These instruments will enable them to work from a more positive angle with children and young people within specialized care.

Besides this, the general professionals in the universal provisions and the specialists in care learn to combine their forces in a more integrated approach. All these measures should support professionals and volunteers to coach all children and young people towards active citizenship and to increase their social competences. To provide them with opportunities to develop their own identities in a safe and healthy environment, in which they feel a sense of belonging. In the end, these measures should provide children and young people with the necessary tools to enter formal education and the labour market. These measures should also reduce the need for specialized care.

Officially the programme Child Friendly Rotterdam has come to an end. In three years time 15 million euros have been spent to make the city more child-friendly. In 2011 the city of Rotterdam won a national prize for ‘the most child- and family-friendly initiative’. Pilot studies conducted in 11 neighbourhoods have shown that child-friendliness truly helps to keep families in the city. A follow-up of the programme by the district councils is therefore very likely. Programme coordinator Rita Wapperom: “Municipalities should focus on their strengths and opportunities. Socially, Rotterdam is a dynamic cultural melting pot similar to New York. It has a lot of potential in terms of space. If we continue to invest in making the city truly child-friendly, Rotterdam will continue to be a very attractive place for young people.”

## Example of Capelle aan den IJssel : Giving young people a voice and responsibility

**“I think Capelle is a cool city that does a lot for young people.” Not many young graffiti artists would be so positive when asked for their opinion about the local administration of their city. John however, spray painting on one of the recently placed municipal graffiti walls, is very pleased with his municipality. Apparently many young people agree, as Capelle aan den IJssel (66.000 inhabitants) has won the Young Local Award, an encouragement prize for the Dutch municipality that implements positive youth policy the best.**

The graffiti walls are an excellent example of the city’s approach to young people. After complaints about perceived graffiti vandalism, the city did not chase the painters away. Instead it worked hard on establishing a good relationship with them. This eventually resulted in the designation of four public areas, frequented by youngsters, as areas for free expression of graffiti art. The painters were involved in the design of the walls, the choice of the right locations and the promotion of the walls among the target group. The placing of the walls lead to a significant decrease of complaints about graffiti vandalism.





The positive attitude towards young people is one of the many aspects that convinced the jury of the Young Local Award to nominate Capelle aan den IJssel three times between 2008 and 2011 and to proclaim the city winner in 2011. One of the jury members: “Capelle aan den IJssel stands out because it does not only incidentally organizes good activities for young people, it really provides structural support. Its youth policy is formulated in very positive terms and is firmly embedded in existing structures.” In the national contest organized by the National Youth Council and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, municipalities compete for the Young Local Award and the title of ‘Best municipality concerning positive youth policy’. The jury looks at four categories: participation and policy, opportunities and talents, leisure and local infrastructure.

Capelle aan den IJssel does especially well in the field of participation and policy. Its Youth Agenda, the instrument providing the framework for the city’s integral youth policy, was developed after thorough consultation of the target group by means of a public survey and a Youth Conference. It was set up in close collaboration with many partners within the youth sector. Rather than on prevention and care, the Agenda’s policy framework focuses on the active creation of favourable conditions for an optimal development of young people’s talents. To name a few priorities: stimulating youth participation, encouraging parental commitment, creating youth-friendly neighbourhoods and facilitating non-formal real life learning.

## Participation and leisure

Due to the growing positive approach to youth policy, participation, volunteering and youth work receive more and more attention in the Netherlands. To encourage young people to be active citizens and participate in society, the Netherlands follow the joint agenda of the member states of the European Union as laid down in the European Youth Strategy (2010 – 2018) to further invest in young people. It is regarded as a right for children and young people to have all opportunities for full participation in society. The responsibilities for preventive youth policy are laid down in the Social Support Act. It aims to create better conditions for all citizens to participate in society and enable young people to develop into independent and socially committed citizens. The responsibility is decentralized and is mainly shaped at the local level.

A solid partner in setting up the Youth Agenda is the Capelle Youth Council, which consists of 25 young people (age 12-23). Over the years it has gained a real influence on youth policy in Capelle aan den IJssel. “The City Council takes us seriously.”, says chairman Hendrik. “We are often consulted, not only when the Youth Agenda is concerned but on many youth-related issues.” When asked to explain the success of the youth council, Hendrik identifies three strong points. “We are the first youth council in the Netherlands working with a professional youth clerk, who does most of the secretarial work and knows much better than we do how things work in the town hall. Another aspect is the relatively large sum of money that we get from the municipality: 75.000 euros per year. And then there is the diversity in our group: we are 25 people from very different backgrounds. Each one of us is in contact with youth of our own subculture, religion, age-group or neighbourhood.

This way we have antennae in each and every part of the city, so we can represent Capelle's youth as a whole."

The city is working on establishing a Children's Council, to be linked to the Youth Council. In the project 'Class in the Council', school children and their teachers are invited to the City Hall where they are taught about local democracy by city councillors. Over the past two years Capelle aan den IJssel has experimented with a Children's Mayor, who performs ceremonial tasks together with the real Mayor, and a Children's Board that discusses the needs of children in the city and the realization of a charity project for children from underprivileged families. Policy advisor Tanja Kas: "We want children in Capelle to learn, early on, that they may join the debate and that their voice can be heard. This may have an effect later on in life." Children's Mayor Emma (12) agrees: "Later I want to become a politician because it feels good to be able to do something for other people."

Capelle aan den IJssel not only gives young people a voice but also provides opportunities to show responsibility. This is clearly shown in the peer education project of the municipal Youth and Family Centre, in which young people (age 17-18) educate their peers on unwanted pregnancies, alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Project coordinator Elzelien Vermeijden: "Alcohol and drugs are dangerous when you are young. Research shows that young people of a certain age are far more influenced by their peers than by their parents or their teachers. When young people have problems, they don't turn to an organization. If they see that other young people are part of that organization, it will be easier for them to join in." All peer educators are trained by professional educators and receive a certificate that is recognized by their schools.



Winner  
Jong Lokai Bowl 2011

## Youth participation in Youth and Family Centres

To reach out to young people and to stimulate them to participate in their local Youth and Family Centre, the Christian trade union set up a project in 2011. It trained young people as peer counsellors in seven municipalities. One of them is Capelle aan den IJssel. The idea was that informing young people can best be done by other young people. The trade union also developed a methodology handbook for youth participation within Youth and Family Centres.

Every municipality in the Netherlands has a Youth and Family Centre. The core business of these centres is connecting, upgrading and strengthening the already available support on growing up and parenting. These centres are to be easily accessible, recognizable and close to home. They are the location to which parents, children and young people can turn with their questions and problems.

Ownership for young people is also the motto of the peer mediation project that was initiated by the municipality, but is carried out by a welfare organization on the basis of result oriented agreements. Policy advisor Remco Giling: “In this project, relatively simple conflicts between young people or between young people and third parties are mediated by their peers. The mediators intervene at schools and in neighbourhoods when local residents complain about vandalism or other public nuisance. Because the peer mediators speak the same language as the young people involved, their solutions often work better than those of teachers and other professionals.” Schools saw an immediate decrease of bullying and aggression, both verbal and physical. Peer mediation is also a valuable experience for the peer mediators themselves as they acquire many useful social competencies.

Training to become a peer mediator is delivered by several schools in Capelle aan den IJssel, in close cooperation with professional mediators.

All in all, Capelle aan den IJssel seems the place to be for young people that want to participate. Graffiti artists, school children, youth councillors, peer educators and mediators alike: all young people of Capelle aan den IJssel are invited to make themselves heard and to take up responsibility. Here's to the next award!

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## Example of Maastricht: Together we can do anything!

**All young people have dreams. The programme Dream Youngsters in the city of Maastricht allows young people with fewer opportunities to realize them. It offers a last chance to school dropouts and unemployed youth to make a better future more accessible. It does so in close cooperation with educational institutes, private enterprise and the participants themselves. The motto of the programme: together we can do anything!**

“All my life I have been told that I am good for nothing”, says Dream Youngster Koen (21) while putting away his guitar. He dropped out of school at the age of 15 because of dyslexia and behavioural problems, but finally found his way as a sound engineer and guitar teacher at the local Pop Music Centre, one of the project partners. “This is really what I want to do with my life, it’s a dream come true.” The youth workers, music teachers and counsellors at Dream Youngsters played a key role in his success. They helped him to discover his talents, to describe his dream and to adjust it to reality. They challenged him to hang on to it and keep faith. Through their network he got his first real work experience in the music industry. And, most important for Koen’s future, they involved a vocational school to validate his work experience with an officially recognized certificate.

School dropout rates are high in Zuid-Limburg, the region of which Maastricht (121.000 inhabitants) is the capital city. Koen is one of Maastricht's 450 'young people with fewer opportunities': youth in vulnerable positions, often facing an overload of simultaneous problems and without any starting qualifications. They hang around in the streets, cannot keep up at school, show antisocial behaviour, are unemployed or come into conflict with the law. Common characteristic is their lack of motivation to make something of their lives. It is exactly this aspect that Dream Youngsters wants to tackle. It tries to re-establish motivation and self-confidence by focusing entirely on young people's aspirations, skills and talents.

### **Tackling dropout and youth unemployment**

To tackle school dropout and youth unemployment, the ministry of Education, Culture and Science developed 'The Action Plan Youth'. This plan is intended to provide more and equal opportunities for young people in education and in the labour market, alongside the ambitions of the European Union Agenda 2020 and it's Youth Strategy. The Dutch government is keen to further reduce the number of dropouts, to support youth entrepreneurship and to focus on talents and competencies of young people.

The plan is aimed at keeping young people in school for a longer period, offering more support to match young people with already existing jobs and creating more internships and traineeships for them. There is extra attention for the transition from preparatory to intermediate vocational education, better career orientation and guidance, more and better care in schools, more challenging forms of education, and more tailored individual solutions. At the local level municipalities choose integrated approaches with involvement of a variety of sectors, like local businesses, (housing) companies, career advisors, employment agencies, schools and youth work. The latter as an intermediating partner between the young people themselves and the education and employment sectors.

Financed by a local private foundation, which provided a lump sum grant of 400.000 euros per year, the expected outcome of the project is reduction of early school dropouts and less unemployment amongst young people (16-24 years). Its main strategy consists of the broadening of young people's horizons with respect to education and training opportunities, adjusting their dreams to make them more realistic and improving their social skills. Participants find their way to the project through the city's youth centres, schools, the unemployment office and various public welfare organizations. Anja, one of Dream Youngsters' professional youth workers: "When I meet possible candidates in the city, I focus straight away on what they want in life. What makes them enthusiastic, what do they dream of? And I try to find out what their talents are. What qualities do they possess, what are they good at?"

The organization behind Dream Youngsters is Trajekt, Maastricht's largest welfare organization. Key to its success: a holistic approach and an active cooperation with its partner organizations. Project manager Henk Geelen: "The individual young person is at the centre of our attention. We work with each and every aspect of his or her life in need of support. This is crucial to our approach. Together with our participants we create tailor-made educational pathways to realize their dreams. In order to do this well, we rely on our partner organizations, who are all specialists in their own field. If a youngster needs psychological help, if there is an alcohol or drugs problem, if we need educational advice, there is always one of our partners that can provide help. Like a spider in a web we act as the leading and binding factor in a large community of companies, schools, civil services, the police, sports clubs, public health services and welfare organizations. This enables us to create a network of support around each participant."



One might sceptically say that this tailor-made approach is costly and labour-intensive. Research has shown that the opposite is true: investing in potentially ‘high risk youngsters’ at an early stage prevents much higher costs later in life, money otherwise spent on youth care, psychiatry, social security and justice (R. In’t Veld, ‘Costs and benefits of early school dropout’, 2007).

Dream Youngsters is divided into four projects, each one covering a field of interest close to the young people’s lives. In the project concerning personal hygiene, work experience as a beautician can be obtained in a beauty salon. The car technology project offers apprenticeships in a garage. In Enter Training, with a focus on music, entertainment and catering, participants work in music centres and other cultural institutions. The construction work project provides work experience at a construction site under the guidance of a qualified professional.

In all these projects, the cooperation between education and corporate social responsibility is clearly visible: companies and other organizations in Trajekt’s network provide opportunities to obtain work experience whereas the necessary training and certification is delivered by Maastricht’s largest vocational school. The local government is an important sparring partner as well. Being an independent welfare organization responsible for the implementation of local youth policy, Trajekt has made result-oriented agreements with the municipality.

In terms of concrete results, Dream Youngsters has been quite successful. Between 2007 and 2010, 45% of the project's 168 participants graduated with official qualifications. 32% found a job, 48% successfully applied for further education or training and the remaining 20% is still closely monitored by the staff. After the programme ended in 2010, its philosophy, way of working and organizational structure have been adopted by the city's largest placement service. Under the name of 'Werksschool Maastricht' and funded by both the ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and the European Social Fund, the dreams of many young people continue to come true.

# Relevant organizations in the Netherlands

## Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

Since 2010 youth policy has been the coordinating responsibility of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. The State Secretary is responsible for the integral youth programme, integral youth supervision, youth inspection, the secure institutions for youth care, and the integration of referral and assessment.

> [www.government.nl/ministries/vws](http://www.government.nl/ministries/vws)

## Association of Netherlands Municipalities

As the principal representative of all Dutch municipalities, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (in Dutch: VNG) promotes and discusses the associations' interests with the central government, parliament, the European institutions and other public organizations. The VNG coordinates the Dutch Child Friendly Cities Network and has an active role in moving towards positive youth policy in the Netherlands.

> [www.vng.nl](http://www.vng.nl) click on 'English' button.

## National Youth Council

The mission of the Dutch National Youth Council (in Dutch: NJR) is to foster youth participation. This umbrella organization gives young people (aged 12-30 years) the opportunity to show who they are and what they are capable of, whether in their local community or at the UN in New York. NJR gives governmental bodies and other organizations advice on youth policy. NJR is a peer-led organization.

> [www.njr.nl](http://www.njr.nl) click on English flag.



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The **Netherlands Youth Institute** is the Dutch national institute for compiling, verifying and disseminating knowledge on children and youth matters, such as child abuse, residential care, youth care, parenting support and family policy. The Netherlands Youth Institute's main aim is to improve the physical, cognitive, mental and social development of children and young people by improving the quality and effectiveness of the services rendered to them and to their parents or carers.

For questions on the Netherlands Youth Institute, youth policy in the Netherlands, international cooperation and exchange programmes, please visit [www.youthpolicy.nl](http://www.youthpolicy.nl) or send an email to [international@nji.nl](mailto:international@nji.nl).

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